

Medicaid

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Statement on consideration of legislation to block grant the Medicaid program September 20, 1995

By Henry A. Waxman

Today we are witness to the ultimate act of irresponsibility. Today this Committee acts to repeal the Medicaid program, the health care safety net for 36 million people in this country. 36 million of the most vulnerable in our society--people in nursing homes, severely disabled adults, children with no other health insurance coverage--they and their families see the program which has been there for 30 years thrown out in a few hours time.

My Republican colleagues do this to slash \$182 billion Federal dollars from health care spending, regardless of the consequences. They do this to limit the Federal financial commitment for the provision of health care for these vulnerable people.

We are all asked to do this without having any idea of what is in the complex legislation before us. It was only 36 hours ago that this proposal was made public. Figures on the distribution of funds under this bill and what it means for State Medicaid efforts were kept under wraps. They were shared with the press before they were shared with the Members of this Committee. They were developed behind closed doors with the Republican Governors but not with their Democratic colleagues.

This is not the way to enter into the most major change ever undertaken of a Federal health care program. This is a procedure designed to hide the truth, not shed light upon it.

We have never experimented with a block grant of this magnitude. After all, we are talking here of a program which already accounts for 44% of all the money the Federal government sends to the States--and it would be half of all the money by the year 2000. We have never been so willing to turn our back at the Federal level on doing our fair share to help poor people get necessary health and long term care.

No Member here today understands the full implications of what this change means for poor children in their State, for low income elderly and the severely disabled in their State, for the residents of nursing homes in their State, and the families who love them. No one knows the impact these changes will have on absolutely critical health care institutions in their districts and States, like children's hospitals--which are heavily reliant on Medicaid reimbursements, on safety net hospitals, on rural and community health centers who are staying alive because of Medicaid help.

It is not we who take the risk here. It is a risk we ask 18 million children, 7 million mothers, 4 million elderly and 6 million disabled to assume.

Nobody has a right to necessary medical services under this bill. Nobody is assured of minimum protections. Protections for spouses who face impoverishment when their spouse enters a nursing home, quality standards to protect residents in nursing homes, home and community based services for the mentally retarded--evidently we at the Federal level wash our hands of any responsibility of assuring these basic protections.

Do I think most States will try to do a good job? Of course I do. And possibly some won't. But no matter how hard a State tries to do well, we make it harder for them by removing the equal partnership, the equal commitment of the Federal government.

An AIDS epidemic occurs and Medicaid is the only place to turn? Don't look for additional Federal help. Recession hits in a State and many more are left with no protection but the State Medicaid program? The Federal contribution stays capped. The number of uninsured continues to rise? It's not our problem.

I fear today we begin a process which will penalize a State which tries to do right by its citizens. We risk a race to the bottom by States whose neighbors do less. The Federal contribution is fixed. It's not our problem anymore.

My Republican colleagues say proudly that over the seven years covered by this bill they will send \$773 billion in Federal dollars to the States--the equivalent of half the entire Federal budget for this fiscal year. But they send this money without knowing who will benefit or what they are buying. Because make no mistake, there is no accountability in this system. This is not something any of us should be proud of.

What we do today is foolhardy, and it is wrong.

I urge my colleagues to reject this proposal. Grant 36 million Americans a reprieve from MediGrant.